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Mr. Gagan Sikand

The Honourable Lucie Moncion

Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament

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● (1205)

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand (Mississaug... Streetsville, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everybody. I call this meeting to order.

Today we're receiving a briefing from the Parliamentary Budget Officer. I'd like to introduce Mr. Fréchette.

Mr. Fréchette, if you'd like to introduce your colleagues as well, then we'll get started. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette (Parliamentary Budget Officer, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Joint Chair, Mr. Joint Chair, vice-chairs, honourable senators and members of Parliament, thank you for this invitation.

I am accompanied today by Mr. Jason Jacques, Chief Financial Officer and Senior Director, Costing and Budgetary Analysis, and by Ms. Sloane Mask, Deputy Chief Financial Officer and Acting Director, Parliamentary Relations, Outreach and Planning.

As you know, amendments to the Parliament of Canada Act last year resulted in the position of Parliamentary Budget Officer being recognized as an independent officer of Parliament. The order in council of September 21, 2017, established its status as such and confirmed that its legislative mandate would be expanded to include the costing of political parties' election platforms. September 21 was also the date that marked the separation of the PBO and the Library of Parliament, which meant that the PBO had to quickly establish its own administrative processes and internal controls.

[*English*]

Every separation involves a certain level of risk and uncertainty that can affect ongoing operations. New legislative requirements were also introduced as part of PBO's services to parliamentary committees, senators, and MPs. These new requirements included additional administrative responsibilities resulting from the new legislation, for example, annual reports to be tabled on activities, work plans, submitting reports to both Speakers, and so on. As such, it was strategically imperative to act quickly to maintain services to parliamentarians, without interruption, throughout the transition.

Given the situation, a decision was made to negotiate with the administration of the Library of Parliament to have it provide administrative services in the short and medium term. This decision was based on the following criteria: services at competitive costs compared with other organizations; the political neutrality of the Library of Parliament; the experience it has acquired since 2005 in providing similar administrative services to another independent officer of Parliament, namely the Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner; the added benefit of having a team of library managers already familiar with the needs of the Office of the PBO, ensuring that PBO analysts and managers could continue their analysis activities during the transition; the flexibility to revisit the administrative agreements after the 2019 election; and, most importantly, the option to remain as part of the House of Commons IT environment for data protection, not only while Parliament is in session but also during election periods, during which political parties may decide to submit their campaign promises, on a confidential basis, to have the financial costs evaluated by the Office of the PBO.

[*Translation*]

I am also glad to report that our 2018-19 estimates have been considered by the Speaker of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Commons, who conducted their thorough due diligence. After which, the PBO's chief financial officer and deputy chief financial officer exercised oversight attesting our budget requirements. Our budget was then referred to a parliamentary standing committee for final approval.

For 2018-19, the PBO budget totals $7.6 million, including a total voted budgetary requirement of $7 million, as well as a statutory budget component of $600,000 to fund the employee benefits program. You will find further details in the notes we provided beforehand.

In conclusion, I'd like to say that for this year and the subsequent year, our planning is based on a voted budget of $7 million, which is due to the additional support needed for the transition, as well as to an increased number of requests from parliamentarians.

● (1210)

Next year's budget will also total $7 million. This is due to additional costs generated by the general elections, since it will be an election year, during which, as I mentioned, the Office of the PBO will have to cost the political parties' election platforms. Afterwards, our annual budget will stabilize at $6.5 million annually for a period of three years, until the next general elections.

Thank you, Madam Joint Chair and Mr. Joint Chair.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Thank you for your testimony.

We'll move to questions.

Senator Mercer, you have five minutes.

Hon. Terry M. Mercer (Senator, Nova Scotia (Northend Halifax), Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

It's great to finally see you here. It's taken a while.

The cost that political parties will incur to comply with new rules, has that been calculated? We continue to add more and more duties to political parties to comply with rules that we come up with in this place, but there's never any reference to the cost of that, which reduces the effectiveness because all political parties are supported by good Canadians who are donating their money. Many of them would be surprised at how much of their money is going for compliance as opposed to what they are actually donating for.

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: Do you mean the cost of compliance for the parliamentary budget office itself?

That's why we were very careful. My two CFOs beside me did their work in terms of limiting the amount of money. When we planned our new budget, the main criterion was how many parliamentarians we have to serve compared with other parliaments in the world. As I mentioned in my remarks, costing the electoral platforms, it will be $500,000 more that we will ask for every general election just to serve the political parties.

In that context, we don't calculate how much we spend on each project, but we are very efficient. Since the new legislation, we are up to 25 requests for analysis and reports that we did.

Hon. Terry M. Mercer: I would suggest then, and I'll allow colleagues around the table to contradict me, that someone else around this table or a group that one of us represents will challenge your numbers. I'll tell you that now. They'll say that your numbers are wrong. You will come up with a number and they'll say, no, that can't be the case. Maybe it will be a party that I support or somebody else supports, but you need to anticipate that.

How are you going to be able to demonstrate that your numbers are accurate numbers in the middle of a campaign where everybody's trying to say that their numbers are the right ones and yours are not?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: I think the independence of the PBO now is part of that. It would have been impossible to do the costing of electoral platforms during the election while being part of the Library of Parliament. I think it would have created some kind of risk. There are still risks associated with doing that.

As I mentioned, political parties can contest the numbers, and we've developed some guidelines. We met all the political parties so far and they know what to expect from us. They know the timeline. We made a commitment that we will be able to.... 120 days before the general election is the date that is the beginning for political parties to submit their platforms for costing.

What we are afraid of is not the political parties themselves contesting the numbers. That we can deal with. It's going to be the fake new, false news, using the PBO's numbers on blogs and so on. This is something that we are concerned about, but we are prepared to do that.

● (1215)

Hon. Terry M. Mercer: How will you police that?

How are you going to identify and contradict the fake news?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: The legislation is very strict. We do the platform costing. We give the numbers to a representative of a political party, and we have to keep that confidential until the political party writes back to the PBO saying that they have made it public. If they don't write—if they just say, "We made it public"—and I know they made it public, that's one thing, but I cannot release the document. That is the insurance of political parties revealing the right approach.

If they don't, or if they use the numbers and manipulate them—which I'm pretty sure political parties will not do—we will go public afterwards. Not only that, but Jason and I also had meetings with the Chief Electoral Officer, and we will have a meeting with the commissioner of Canada Elections to discuss whether we will be perceived as a third party.

My concern was that I don't have any parliamentary privilege, so during the campaign, I don't want to be under the gun of any other third parties who will attack us. In that context, as I said, the quality and the validity of our reports will be the insurance that will protect us against false news, fake news, and so on.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Thank you for that.

That's the end of the five minutes.

Madame Quach, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Salaberry—Suroît, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Fréchette, thank you for being here with us today.

Could you describe for us, if you will, the changes in your office since your mandate and powers were amended by Bill C-44?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: Certainly.

I'd say there have been three or four major changes.

I mentioned the first one in my remarks, and that is the costing of the parties' electoral platforms. Allow me to mention in passing that there is only one other PBO in the world that has the legislative authority to do that sort of calculation, which is the Australian one. The beauty of their mandate is that not only do they cost the electoral platforms, but their report is only published 30 days after the election. This is related to the question put by Senator Mercer. The PBO is protected against data manipulation. Thirty days after the election, it can publish a report that presents the real facts.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: And are you supposed to publish your report much later?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: For instance, if we calculate the cost of an electoral platform, or of a measure—it could be just a measure, although we prefer to cost the entire platform—I can provide the information to a political party, and that party must advise us, in writing, if it intends to use our data. Afterwards we will release our report. The legislation allows us to do that.

After the election, we will publish a report. In fact, we must submit an annual report to both speakers in the beginning of the year, i.e. 30 days before the end of the fiscal year. We also plan to prepare a report on the election, that is a report on how things were done. The point is to provide food for thought to the parliamentary debate on the quality of this legislation, which is relatively strict for us. That is one of the important changes.

As for the second change which I alluded to, it explains the increase in our budget. Currently, we can process three types of requests. We can generate our own reports during a given year—not necessarily an election year, but any year generally. The reports on the government's taxation and fiscal soundness are an example. Parliamentary committees may also submit requests for cost analyses.

Four other committees may also submit requests to us. They are mentioned in the act, and they are the Standing Senate Committee on Finance, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, and the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. These four committees may submit specific requests regarding economic trends or any other macro-economic analysis. All of the other committees may request analyses on the cost of measures being examined by Parliament.

And finally, all of the senators and members of Parliament may also request analyses on the cost of certain measures, for instance a motion, a private member's bill or a government bill. What has changed since 2017 is that the act now states that we "shall" carry out an analysis when a request is submitted to us. Previously, we had a choice; we could say to a member or a senator that we could or could not do what they asked. Now, the word "shall" is used throughout the act. This imposes an obligation, which is extremely difficult, hence the importance of having a few more people to carry out these cost analyses.

In conclusion, both the International Monetary Fund, in its analysis of independent financial institutions, as well as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD, have stated that cost analyses, for the entire network of PBO offices in the world, represent the most time-consuming task for a team of analysts. So clearly, we need more people to carry out the cost analyses and allow us to comply with the legislative requirement.

● (1220)

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Do you think you have enough staff to meet these requirements?

Regarding the costing of electoral platforms, you said that the Australian PBO had a brilliant procedure. Would you like to see changes in Canada so that your report would only be tabled 30 days after having done an analysis?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: I am not asking for any changes, and I am working with the law as it stands. It has just been amended and I am not in a position to request a legislative change. As I said, it's a new model.

We copied the Australian model to some degree by asking the Canadian PBO to perform this costing analysis, but a different process was chosen, which is to have us publish our figures during the electoral campaign. There is thus a risk that our figures or other elements may be subject to challenges. We aren't infallible, especially since we are required to work rather quickly.

There is another aspect regarding the law that comes into play during an electoral campaign.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): I'm sorry. I'm going to have to cut you off. Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, go ahead.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for coming up and providing us thoughts from your side.

To the PBO, do you believe that a committee is necessary to review the work of your office? Is this no longer the case after the changes? Do you believe we should have the committee involved in the transition?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: Do you mean a committee like this committee?

Mr. Bob Saroya: Yes.

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: The legislators decided to, as I said, separate, to get the PBO outside the Library of Parliament. Therefore, at that point, it was clear that the PBO was no longer under the jurisdiction of this committee.

However, the legislators added a fourth committee to the list of the already three main committees that were mentioned in the old legislation. The four committees I mentioned previously, we have one from the Senate and three from the House of Commons. They are really those that if we do have a problem in terms of access to information and so on, we can always turn to them.

This year, as I mentioned in my remarks, the Treasury Board referred our budget to the government operations committee of the House of Commons for its review. I cannot comment more as to having one specific committee. I can give you the example of the Auditor General who basically reports to the public accounts committee.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Will we see any difference from your previous position to an agent of the House of Commons, an agent of the Parliament? Can we expect the same progress, the same sorts of reports tomorrow versus previously?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: Yes, probably. Being an agent of Parliament, a real independent agent of Parliament, is different from being an agent of the library, which was the case before. It provides, I would not say more credibility, but certainly more room to manoeuver in terms of the budget. That is, as I mentioned, a costing platform will cost, for us.... We just planned a budget of $500,000 for a general election year. I'm not sure how it would have been possible to do that under the Library of Parliament at that time.

Being an agent of Parliament, being part of that great family of other agents of Parliament provides this freedom to manoeuver and also this credibility in conducting some of the responsibilities and duties that are now part of the legislation.

● (1225)

Mr. Bob Saroya: This is something different. Do you see duplication between your office and the Library of Parliament? If so, how do you recommend we reduce the unnecessary duplication between the two parties, between your office and the library?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: The legislator, in his or her wisdom, included a clause in the legislation where it is mentioned that unnecessary duplication.... I don't know why in English it's "unnecessary duplication".

[*Translation*]

The French only mentions "duplication", without any qualifier.

[*English*]

"Duplication" is already unnecessary.

The parliamentary librarian and I have to maintain a collaborative approach to make sure that taxpayers' money is well used in terms of our mandate. Luckily, my colleague, Madam L'Heureux, and I have a very good working relationship. We share this kind of information, and we make sure there is no duplication between her mandate and the PBO's mandate.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Can we expect a still independent PBO, where we won't see any political interference in the future?

Have you any comments or concerns or suggestions from that angle?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Give a very short answer, please.

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: In my five years, I never had any political interference with my office.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Thank you.

Mr. Iacono.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the representatives of the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer for being here with us.

Until quite recently, the office was a part of the Library of Parliament. The separation led to several changes, not only for you and for the library, but also as regards the services provided, so as to avoid any duplication.

My question is a bit different from the one that was just asked.

Can you tell me how the PBO office and the library work together to reduce duplication of the resources and services provided to parliamentary committees, senators and members of Parliament?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: Thank you for the question.

My answer will be brief. First, the librarian and I work in close co-operation, just as we have always done, not only before the changes made to the act in 2017, but also since then.

Now that the act makes it very clear that the Parliamentary Budget Officer must cost measures —a task the library used to do, and may still do, depending on the type of request—this is what we do. If a member of Parliament or a senator asks us to do a cost analysis, an office like ours does not necessarily have all of the analytical capability that the library has, and we function according to a different model. We do not do a confidential cost analysis; if someone asks us to do a confidential cost analysis of a measure, a private member's bill or a motion, my answer will be "no", because my business model applies to all of Parliament, as prescribed by the act. The library, however, can perform confidential tasks for parliamentarians. There is a whole process between the research service and my office whereby we agree on how to divide up the tasks.

The important point is the cost assessment. I will only do cost assessments for existing measures. If someone tells me that he has an idea and would like a cost analysis done for that idea, I do not have a legislative mandate for that. That would probably be more in keeping with the mandate of the research service of the Library of Parliament.

● (1230)

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Did you run into difficulties during the development of that co-operation, and if so, could you tell us which ones?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: I encountered no difficulties in setting up a collaborative process to work with the Library of Parliament.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Just like the library, you provide services to parliamentarians. Can you describe the exact nature of those services?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: The act sets out four general categories of services. The first is that the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer must produce macroeconomic documents, analyses and reports.

The second is that we must respond to any request made by any of the four committees mentioned in the act, and they are the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, and the Standing Senate Committee on Finance. Those four committees may under the act request macroeconomic analyses, analysis of economic trends, and so on.

All other parliamentary committees of the Senate and House of Commons may request cost analyses. For example, what will it cost to implement Bill *x* if it is passed into law? I can give you another very concrete example. Two years ago, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health asked us to do a costing analysis for a national pharmacare program that does not exist in Canada. The members of the committee adopted a motion. The committee's motion became the order of reference of the PBO, so to speak, for that cost analysis. We worked with the Standing Committee on Health and we were able to draft a report, nine months later, which the committee then used to prepare its own report.

In the final analysis, all parliamentarians may submit requests to us, not about ideas, but having to do with the financial cost of parliamentary measures that already exist and are debated in Parliament.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: I am going to continue based on the examples you gave.

Do you have any other suggestions to provide to the committee to reduce duplication, provide more services, and also reduce the costs of the two offices? Currently, they are separated, so would you have other solutions to propose to avoid duplication?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: At this time, I think the model is complementary and works well in that way.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Thank you.

Next we have Mr. Sorenson.

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank you, sir, for being here today and for bringing your staff with you. Thank you for the comments you've given to this committee.

This may have been covered in some of the other questions, but how many employees are working in the parliamentary budget office?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: Currently we have 18 people, including directors. I include directors as not only directors and managers but also as contributing to the various reports and analyses. Jason, for example, as a senior director of costing, writes reports as well. He doesn't only manage and supervise reports.

We have 18 people, including me, and right now we have five support staff. One of the five is on contract just because of the transition. That is what I mentioned in my remarks in terms of additional costs. You have to understand that getting out of the library meant that we had to develop our own policies—official languages, staffing, and so on. We needed someone to write all these policies, plus write all the MOUs that are in the process of being negotiated with the library. Most of them are now completed. We needed someone to write the MOUs so that the library became the service provider to the PBO.

Right now we are 23. We are in an intensive recruitment process. The process is going well. We plan to have 33 to 35 analysts working for parliamentarians, plus seven to nine people in terms of support.

Hon. Kevin Sorenson: Do you do any work outside of this Parliament? For example, our Auditor General is also responsible for the Northwest Territories or somewhere up north, whether it's the Yukon or Northwest Territories. Is there anything broader than this Parliament here that you would be requested to do, from provinces or from other levels of government?

● (1235)

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: What you see here is what the legislation basically says, that parliamentarians, senators, MPs, senate committees, and House of Commons committees are the main "clients", if I may. We don't do work outside, although we do a little bit of outreach work with the PBO network, with the OECD network of PBOs. There are about 38 PBOs recognized by the OECD. We do some work in terms of good practices and so on.

I know that Jason wants me to mention that he attended an international meeting recently. The Canadian PBO is recognized as a very good model or example of good practices in terms of what we do with regard to the mandate and the relationship with this Parliament.

Hon. Kevin Sorenson: Do any of the provinces have your equivalent within their province? Do the provinces employ a provincial budget office?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: Ontario is one province. They have the Financial Accountability Office, or FAO. The financial accountability officer who was just appointed, by the way, is a former senior director from my office.

Hon. Kevin Sorenson: We have an election going on in Ontario now. Are his or her capabilities the same as yours with regard to costing amongst the political parties that come up with ideas or platforms? Does their office cost those programs?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: Just as a personal comment, he is a lucky man. He doesn't have to do the election platform costing in Ontario. It's the Auditor General in Ontario who is essentially calculating a baseline at the beginning and end and then providing that to the various parties. That is exactly what it is in Quebec also, where an election is coming. The Auditor General provides baselines such as macroeconomic projections, which parties can use for their own calculations.

Hon. Kevin Sorenson: Going back to Mr. Saroya's point, the non-partisanship of the Library of Parliament has never ever been in question, even though the Auditor General has a difficult job bringing down an audit against certain departments they study. You say that in five years there's never really been a question, but certainly there is a possibility that parties may believe there is partisanship when they're in the middle of an election and all of a sudden a report is released, or something like that. How do you safeguard against that?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: The quality of the work, the integrity, and the reputation of the office for the past 10 years will be the guarantee that the reports will be neutral, non-partisan, and so on.

Hon. Kevin Sorenson: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the extra time.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Madam Quach.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to put a question on access to information.

Could you tell us about the difficulties you encountered in obtaining government documents you would have liked to consult to do your costing analyses?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: Regarding access to information, the situation has improved over the last years. However, the documents the government considers to be cabinet documents are still the object of debate. Consequently, they were not accessible. For instance, all of the gender-based analyses that are carried out for various bills are not accessible because they were submitted to cabinet. That situation remains problematic. Access to information has improved to some extent, even if certain departments are a bit reluctant.

I should also mention that the act now contains a parliamentary recourse process. In other words, if the parliamentary budget officer feels that information should be provided to him that is not forthcoming, he can complain to the Speaker of the House of Commons and to the Speaker of the Senate. That parliamentary recourse existed five years ago when I arrived. The committee had authorized it and it is now included in the act. I have not had to use it up till now.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Do you know how many documents are deemed to be cabinet documents?

As you were saying, you don't have access to gender-based analyses. This means that you cannot cost those measures. Is that correct?

● (1240)

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: In fact, that doesn't help us. Regarding particular budget measures, it would be useful for us to have access to those documents. In the case of gender-based analyses, we try to work most often by using the information we can obtain. It would be preferable that we have access to that information. I don't need to know what was debated in cabinet; I only need the plain and simple analysis. This would facilitate our work. When we study programs targeting children for instance, access to that analysis would allow us to accelerate our work.

Regarding your question, the real test will come during the election campaign. Parliament will suspend its activities for a certain time. I have begun discussions to find out whether the parliamentary recourse would work. A very specific provision in the act allows the PBO to ask the minister to help in the calculation of the financial cost of electoral platforms. The minister can accept or refuse. We will certainly need the help of the departments. We would like the information to be provided to us quickly and easily. We are in fact having discussions about this.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: According to what I understand, you cannot force a minister or department to provide documentation that would help you to calculate costs.

You were saying that there are 38 other PBOs among OECD member countries.

Do some of them have other powers, and a different way of proceeding? Do you think they could provide inspiration to us here in Canada?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: Some cultures are different. We know that in Australia, for instance, the government is very open. All of the people who work in the executive branch in Parliament have very good relationships. It is a different kind of culture. Out of the 38 PBOs, several have trouble accessing information at various levels. As I said earlier, the situation was difficult at first in Canada. Certain aspects still are, but there has been considerable improvement.

Co-operation is excellent regarding infrastructure, for instance. There was a question about that. We frequently collaborate with people from the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance to help them monitor the development of infrastructure and related budgets. Our co-operation with representatives of Infrastructure Canada has improved a great deal over the last months, because they understood how important it is that they provide this information.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Are there departments that are more reluctant to share their figures?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: The departments are like human nature, that is to say that there are always people who are more reluctant than others.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Could we know which ones? Personally, I am interested in everything having to do with youth, particularly the fight against child poverty.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): I'm sorry, we're running out of time, so we're going to move on.

Senator Mercer, if you don't mind, you'll have a few minutes less, because you've already spoken.

Hon. Terry M. Mercer: I have two questions. I'll do them both at the same time. That way it will be up to the witness to determine the length.

The review of campaign platforms adds a very important new wrinkle to what you do. How will you analyze your success after the campaign of 2019? Is there a method for you to come back to say what worked and what didn't work, so that if legislation needs to be fixed to support the office or to change, the information is there?

My final question is a simple question. There are 38 parliamentary budget officers in the OECD countries. How many of them do costing of political campaign platforms?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: I'll go to your second question first. Only one has a legislative mandate: the Australian PBO. In the Netherlands the office does the calculation of the electoral platforms, but it doesn't have the legislative mandate. In the Netherlands it was created in 1947, so it has a long experience. There are about 12 parties, so it's a different story over there.

One, then, has a legislative mandate, which is the Australian one.

I will ask Jason, who is the senior director who will be in charge of the costing of the electoral platforms, to explain how he will do it. Since I will not be there, I'd prefer to ask him to answer your question.

● (1245)

Mr. Jason Jacques (Chief Financial Officer and Senior Director, Costing and Budgetary Analysis, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer): It's a very good question. The starting point for us, quite obviously, is being able to cost all the requests that come in. The second aspect, in addition to costing all the requests we receive, is to cost them in a timely manner, recognizing that for political parties what can be happening on the hustings is potentially happening a little more quickly and dynamically than in the timelines within which we usually work.

Coming back to a point the PBO made earlier, I think that probably the most important or a very important issue will be the perceived credibility of our responses, to the extent that our cost estimates are seen by all political partes and the general public as being relatively straightforward, non-contentious, not generating additional discussion, and that Canadians are able to focus on the policies rather than the numbers and have more meaningful discussions around them. This is something else we'll be watching and measuring as well.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Thank you for that.

Mr. Ouellette.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette (Winnipeg Centre, Lib.): I'd like to ask a brief question.

Will all of the reports be released at the same time during the elections, or do you intend to stagger the process over a certain period of time?

I have another comment to make. I remember that when you testified at the Standing Committee on Finance you said that you expected all departments to actively co-operate. In your estimation, Mr. Fréchette, no department will refuse to participate in calculating the final cost of these election platforms. Is that correct?

Mr. Jean-Denis Fréchette: You have a good memory.

Yes, the reports will be provided to the different political parties over a certain period of time. We said that there would be set timelines to obtain the information. The reports will be given to the political parties in the order in which we receive the information. That does not mean that we will make those reports public. The political party that receives our report can keep it, and not release it publicly. As long as the political party does not release it publicly, we cannot do anything. We will be discreet and we will keep our report confidential.

As for co-operation, I am convinced that the departments will want to take part in the process. As I said, we are negotiating with certain departments such as the Department of Finance, so that we can develop a process to protect everyone, both the reputation of PBO and the department. These departments will have to co-operate in the process since this is set out in the legislation. It mentions that the minister must provide authorization to his deputy minister to co-operate in the process or not. If ministers systematically refuse, deputy ministers will not co-operate. So, it will be difficult to respect the legislation.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Thank you for your response.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here.

We're going to momentarily suspend for the next panel.

● _____ (Pause) _____ ●

● (1250)

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Welcome back.

Madam L'Heureux, you have 10 minutes for your opening statement.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux (Parliamentary Librarian, Library of Parliament): Thank you, Mr. Joint Chair.

Honourable senators, members of Parliament, joint chairs, it is my pleasure to address the committee today regarding the impact on the Library of Parliament of the upcoming closure of Centre Block planned as part of the Long Term Vision and Plan.

I am accompanied today by Catherine MacLeod, Assistant Parliamentary Librarian, who has been overseeing this initiative for the library.

[*English*]

Centre Block is closing for at least a decade, which will have a significant impact on the library. The impact is both a challenge and an opportunity. It's a challenge in terms of the detailed analysis and decision-making that have been a significant focus for us for the past several years. It's also an opportunity as the physical change to our space has provided the impetus to rethink our support to Parliament and to modernize how we deliver products and services.

To adapt to our future new reality, the library is implementing major projects in four areas.

First, we will relocate the main library's collections among several locations.

Second, we are modernizing reference services and refreshing library space by renovating and opening new branches.

Third, we are redesigning how we welcome visitors to Parliament Hill so that they continue to have a high-quality experience at the new visitor welcome centre, West Block, and the Government Conference Centre.

Finally, we are developing a virtual experience of Parliament that will showcase Centre Block during the years of its closure.

[*Translation*]

I would like to start with the most visible change, the closure of the Main Library in Centre Block.

The Main Library will close for the duration of the Centre Block rehabilitation, and the collection will be moved.

We have done this before when the Main Library was renovated in the early 2000s and we can therefore build on that experience.

The collections will be distributed among several branches according to branch specializations and user needs.

[*English*]

The bulk of the main library's collection, including the rare books, will be transferred to 45 Sacré-Coeur in Gatineau. This space was used when we renovated the library in the early 2000s and is currently being upgraded to house the collections when Centre Block closes.

Current levels of service for physical delivery of collection items to users will be maintained. The library is revising its delivery model to respond to an anticipated increase in requests for digital material. For example, we are increasing our electronic collection and digitizing more parliamentary publications to modernize our service to Parliament.

[*Translation*]

The temporary closure of the main library has been a catalyst for the modernization of our reference services, something libraries worldwide are doing as they rethink what it means to be a library in the Internet age.

We will increase the number of points of service, focusing on offering more inviting and comfortable seating, multipurpose work and meeting spaces, technological innovations, and additional electronic resources to enhance user experience.

● (1255)

[*English*]

The library is currently working with colleagues in PSPC, the Senate, and the House of Commons to plan the library's new branches in the Government Conference Centre and in the West Block. Overall, the library will be located to assist parliamentarians where they work.

Our points of service will include existing branches at 125 Sparks Street and in the Confederation Building, the new branch that has opened in the Wellington Building, and the future branches in the West Block and in the Government Conference Centre.

The new design for our branches was piloted with the Wellington branch. It is a stunning place. Natural light reflects from the skylight off the copper walls to create a warm, elegant environment.

[*Translation*]

Parliamentarians and staff are using the collaborative work areas, individual study areas and meeting room. It is an inviting space from which to browse our collection of magazines and newspapers, relax in comfortable seating or work between committee meetings. In the first year since its opening, over 3,000 people used the reading room and close to 700 came to the reference desk to ask questions.

[*English*]

The 125 Sparks Street branch, which is a former bank between O'Connor and Metcalfe, will be our main branch during the Centre Block closure. The 125 Sparks Street branch will be a place for parliamentarians to meet and collaborate with colleagues, constituents, and other stakeholders or work privately in the reading room area with its comfortable chairs and sofas.

Parliamentarians and their staff will be able to stay connected to current events through a wide selection of newspapers, magazines, and television broadcasts from the new state-of-the-art media wall that will be installed in the branch. The branch will also offer parliamentarians an opportunity to browse our collection using mobile devices. It's truly a library of the future, and currently, it is undergoing renovations and is scheduled to reopen in August.

[*Translation*]

In addition, the library is realigning visitor services for Parliament.

After the closure of Centre Block, guided tours will be offered at the Government Conference Centre for the Senate and the West Block for the House of Commons.

The public will also be able to see Parliament at work by attending debates in the public galleries and by observing committee meetings.

[*English*]

Guided tours of both the Government Conference Centre and West Block will include the interim chambers of the Senate and the House of Commons, with stops in the public galleries and on the chamber floors. The tours will also visit a committee room and learn about the transformation of the heritage buildings that will house each chamber.

An electronic ticketing system will also be launched to support the operation of the guided tours from both locations. Parliament will have a permanent visitor welcome centre. Its opening will coincide with the opening of the West Block. The new underground facility will become the front door for visitors at the West Block.

[*Translation*]

The Visitor Welcome Centre will be a modern, four-level underground complex which will include spaces to support visitor services, such as an information desk, a tour departure room and the Parliamentary Boutique.

As I mentioned in my last appearance at this committee, tours of historical rooms at East Block will also be maintained.

[*English*]

In parallel, to mitigate the closure of Centre Block, the library is creating a virtual experience to give Canadians the opportunity to access and explore Centre Block during its closure. We are working in partnership with the National Film Board of Canada to develop and produce this exciting project. Carleton University's immersive media studio and Public Services and Procurement Canada are also involved.

The virtual experience project has three components. First, the public will be able to access a web-based multimedia experience that will include a 2-D website and a 3-D virtual reality production featuring the public spaces of Centre Block. It will highlight the art, architecture, and functions of Parliament that are so familiar to us.

Second, for teachers and youth, a travelling classroom program will include teacher resources and virtual reality equipment that will be shipped to schools across Canada so that children can visit a virtual Parliament in their classrooms.

Third, an on-site visitor destination, using cutting-edge technology, will immerse visitors in a projected virtual experience of Parliament at a location in the national capital region near Parliament Hill.

● (1300)

[*Translation*]

All of the library LTVP projects are currently on track. This is an exciting time for us as the closure of Centre Block has revealed itself to be a true opportunity to think towards the future and evolve how we serve you.

Thank you for inviting us to appear before you today. We will be pleased to answer your questions.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Thank you for that.

Mr. Ouellette.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Thank you very much.

I simply have a few comments and questions about the manner in which the guided tours for the public will be managed at the new visitor centre.

When visitors come to the House to listen to the debates, especially in groups, do you know if they will have to leave the room, as is currently the case for groups of young people who are forced to leave after 30 minutes? Naturally, when I speak to these groups about their experience here, they tell me that they would have liked to stay longer to listen to these debates, but that is not possible.

So, how are you co-operating with security to ensure that the educational experience will be exemplary, and secondly, that security will be respected?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: There are some differences between Centre Block and the new spaces. The new spaces are smaller and access to certain places is restricted for visitors.

For instance, when the House sits, we will not be able to have guided tours for groups in both houses. So, it will not be possible for participants in these guided tours to listen to debates when the House sits.

However, if a visitor who is not a part of a guided tour group wants to go to the galleries to listen to debates, that will continue to be possible.

[*English*]

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: How many seats do you believe will be available for the public in the new gallery? The educative experience is quite important. I think you're doing this educational outreach, which sounds absolutely fantastic, with the virtual element and trying to go to the Canadian public outside of Parliament. If someone actually takes time, though, to come here and wants to see question period, how many people can attend question period and stay for the entire time? Not only while the Prime Minister is speaking but for the final questions by the independents, for some of the motions at the end, and for some of the debates if they want to stay a bit longer? How do they get that full experience, not just the QP experience?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: I do not have the number of seats, in either the House of Commons or the Senate. That's something we would have to consult on with our colleagues in the two administrations and come back to the committee with that information.

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Thank you.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Next we have Senator Mercer.

Hon. Terry M. Mercer: Thank you, Chair.

The opening of new branches and the changing of how you're going to operate while this place is closed are important. Do you have a plan for how you will educate the staff in all of our offices? In many cases that's the point of entry for constituents from across the country who call us in advance of their trip here. Are you going to be able to have a briefing, similar to what you have done today, for our staff?

As well, I want to thank you for remembering to put the East Block on the tour. It is still the hidden gem here, with the original offices of Sir John A. Macdonald and George-Étienne Cartier, and the original cabinet room, etc.

I encourage you, if you haven't been to the East Block, you have to go.

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: Obviously we want to interact with the staff of parliamentarians. At the moment we're—to be fair—focused on the move. It's all about getting ready for the move and getting ready to occupy new spaces. Some are still being renovated at the moment.

It is part of what we're thinking about, though, once we start occupying these new spaces: to be able to do some outreach, some change management, to be able to tell our users where we are located, and to welcome them to our new spaces. That's very much top of mind for us.

I'm not in a position today....

Can you add...? Wonderful.

● (1305)

Ms. Catherine MacLeod (Assistant Parliamentary Librarian, Library of Parliament): Thank you very much.

It's a real pleasure to be here to share our work with you with respect to preparing for the move. With the Wellington Branch, I think the high numbers of parliamentarians and their office staff that we are seeing, who are working in the library and asking for services, are because of the orientation we had with them in that building.

We had a welcoming gift for them that included information about the library branch. We visited them individually and also had some training sessions for them in the branch. The beauty of having five branches during the 10-year closure period is that we will be closer to you and to your office support team. I think that's a positive benefit of the changes we're about to experience.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Okay.

We're moving on to Mr. Iacono.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good day, Ms. L'Heureux. Once again, I wish you a very happy retirement. You will be leaving us, but you are leaving us with many novelties, particularly this concept of a virtual immersion experience.

Could you explain how that will work? What impact will this have, for instance, on the parliamentary guide programs?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: Regarding virtual reality, we want to develop a Web platform to offer a similar visit to what is currently offered in Centre Block, which makes it possible to go to various places and explore. We want to make this a virtual experience. It's what I call 2D.

We want to go even further and use virtual reality technology thanks to which you will be able, from home, to use a virtual reality headset and have an immersive experience visiting the Centre Block. It will even be possible to go a bit further and interact with certain spaces that interest you and to explore them a bit more.

The last part will be a virtual visit to Centre Block from a location in Ottawa that has yet to be determined. You will go into a room, and it will be as though you were entering the Centre Block. All of these elements are being developed.

As for the guides, they will not really be affected by these projects. The guides will offer visits in the new buildings we will be occupying after the move. We are currently working on determining which aspects of these new buildings will be highlighted during these visits.

[*English*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: What stage is the project at?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: We are still in the design phase; we are choosing what we will present through the different products. The deadline we have set for the Web platform is March 2019. For the products being developed for schools, we have a somewhat longer horizon, which is September 2019. As for the immersion experience, which will involve entering a room, we are aiming for December 2019.

[*English*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Where is that project with respect to the virtual experience?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: We have not yet created the immersion experience, which will involve going into a room. We haven't got a space yet, and we are holding discussions with colleagues from Public Services and Procurement Canada to find one.

[*English*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: The cost...?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: Is your question about the costs of the spaces?

[*English*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Do you have any idea of the cost of the virtual experience?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: To fund the virtual experience, we've asked for $5 million in total.

[*English*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Will the MPs and senators get an opportunity to view this beforehand so that we can go back home and tell our constituents, friends, families, etc., what to expect? On your part, is there also going to be an information period where you'll be informing the public of what to expect when coming to visit Ottawa? Is that all going to be taken into consideration?

● (1310)

Ms. Catherine MacLeod: There's quite a lot of communication and change management information related to the closure of Centre Block for visitors and some of the new ways they will able to access Parliament, including the virtual experience, either in their homes across the country and beyond, or here in the capital region.

As the closure of Centre Block approaches we're having an opportunity through social media for parliamentarians' staff, former parliamentarians' staff, and Canadians to share their experiences about Parliament, whether it was as a child coming to visit with their class and so on, and that will be going on for a few months. Before we move forward with the new opportunities to access Parliament, we want to make sure there's also a chance for Canadians to share their experiences of Centre Block.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): I'm sorry. We're going to have to cut you off.

Ms. Catherine MacLeod: We have a nice boutique that will be about double the size in the new visitor welcome centre. I mentioned the last time we were here that there are a number of new products.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Hopefully, you can get that information in with another question.

We're moving on to Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you for your presentation. It all looks beautiful, so much so that, as much as our current library is beautiful, I wonder what we're going to come back to. How is what we're doing now going to influence what we're coming back to? Who is designing the long-term vision for the Library of Parliament 10 years from now? I'm assuming there's someone working on that. Who is working on it, who's responsible for it, and what oversight is currently in place for it?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: I could start, but I think probably Madam MacLeod has more information than I.

There are different aspects to our activities during the closure. For example, one of the elements we're focusing on is visitors. That's part of what we do. There are plans in future years for an expanded visitor centre when we reopen Centre Block. At the moment, there is a team of people, including some of our staff, who are working on that and asking what we want to do when we come back to Centre Block and how we look into that.

We also have people in the library who are looking at our current space here and asking how we ensure that the building is kept in good order, that there's no flooding happening while we're away, and that everything is in good condition.

At the same time they are thinking about when we reopen in 10 years. Are there things that should be introduced in the building that we may not even think about at the moment? We have people here who work with our colleagues at PSPC, and obviously we are always in contact with the Senate and the House of Commons.

Is there something you can add to that?

Ms. Catherine MacLeod: No, it's just that. It's an iconic building. It's our symbol. It's so important as a gathering place. We are definitely thinking ahead 10 years.

We are thinking we'll make some improvements in terms of technology and so on before reopening. However, the library was renovated in the early 2000s, so as long as we protect the woodwork and the artifacts very carefully and the atmosphere is kept as it should be, we'll be looking forward to reopening when the work is done in Centre Block.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Just to follow through on that, it seems as though there's a leadership group that is helping to drive the visioning exercise. Does that exercise have to be approved by some body? What is the body that approves it? I would be grateful if you could tell me that process.

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: I wouldn't say there's a body that approves per se, because what you have is a group of people—senior representatives of the Senate, the House, the Library, PPS from the security angle, and PSPC, which is actually doing the work—who come together on a regular basis as various working groups, as well as people at my level who come together every second week to look at where we are, what we need, and where we are going. That group works together.

When it comes to the House of Commons, there is obviously an interaction with the Speaker and the Board of Internal Economy. It's a similar thing with the Senate, where you have the Standing Committee on Internal Economy and the leadership of the Senate.

Until recently we haven't had an opportunity to interact with the committee, but I interact regularly with the two Speakers, who are in charge of the library. Basically, we work together in a working group and we each go back to what you might call our political leadership and make sure that whatever we commit or agree to is okay and acceptable. Then we come back together and continue working.

● (1315)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

How much time do I have left?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): You have 50 seconds.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Maybe you could just finish up on the boutique.

Ms. Catherine MacLeod: All right. We're pretty excited about the new boutique space. We're very cramped, as you may know, in the current location in Centre Block. It will more than double the size.

We're also looking, for the Government Conference Centre, at having for our senators pop-up. We've modernized our online shopping, and so on. We have been working over the last couple of years with a retail expert who manages the boutique to prepare for the big move, and we're hoping that our sales will continue to grow, as they have been.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Where will the new boutique be?

Ms. Catherine MacLeod: It will be in the visitor welcome centre adjacent to West Block.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Thank you.

Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to welcome our witnesses this afternoon.

[*English*]

There are just a couple of things. Before I start, my colleague, Mr. Sorenson, insisted that I thank you and make sure that your staff are thanked for the great work they do, not only for the committees but for our staff. You folks and your staff do a great job, so please put that on the record and make sure they know we appreciate all the hard work they do.

I think in your comments you mentioned that the date of September 2019 is when this is all going to.... Is that a hard date, or is that a tentative date?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: For the web portion, that's March 2019. For September, we're targeting the school program. We want to start with the school year.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: That makes sense.

In your briefing, you said something about 3,000 people in the last year have used a certain meeting room, or a hall or something. Tell me what hall that is. What did you mean by that?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: That is our branch at the Wellington Building. We've been open a little over a year now at the Wellington Building. It's a bit of a pilot for us. It's a different design. I don't know if you have had an opportunity to visit that location. It has a completely different feel. We wanted to look at how people are reacting to that space.

One of the things that we came to realize is in high demand from parliamentarians over the last few years is meeting rooms. We have one meeting room here available to parliamentarians, and it's in high demand. A space where you can go and collaborate is also in high demand, a place where you can go and sit and not be bothered. I used to joke with some people that our poor parliamentarians, when they are not in a building where their offices are located, have two places to go: the cafeteria and the library. We're going to make it pleasant in the library. We can't influence the cafeteria.

That's the space where we've had those visits. It's at the Wellington Building, the library branch there.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: You say there are 700 people. Is this during a year? You said 3,000 visitors during a year, and 700 of them pursued questions or went to the staff there. How much of a staff do you have at that facility?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: The 700 is the people who come physically to the reference desk.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: How many people do you have answering these questions?

Ms. Catherine MacLeod: It would rotate. We have librarians on rotation, but it's quite a small counter. We usually have one or two in each of the smaller branches. We can get you a more specific answer.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: It's just that I think if you have two people there, or three people, or five people answering 700 inquiries in a year, it seems.... We do that in a constituency in a week. Is it possible that facility is overstaffed? Has somebody looked at that?

Ms. Catherine MacLeod: Maybe I can add a little bit more. The reference librarians who are at the desk, whether it be in Centre Block or in one of the branches such as Wellington, do other work as well. A lot of our requests come in via email, for instance, so when they are not serving a parliamentarian or a member of staff personally, they will be online dealing with requests or doing reference work apart from the face to face.

● (1320)

Mr. Guy Lauzon: It gives me a little more comfort. Thank you very much for that.

Can you tell me what your overall budget for the Library of Parliament is?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: I think it's about $45 million or $46 million. It has been fluctuating with the departure of the PBO and adding new things for the virtual release. I don't have the number in my head, but we can always follow up with you if you want.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Thank you very much.

My colleague is going to take the rest of my time.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Mr. Saroya.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Chair.

Again, from our side, thank you for the great work. We're going to miss you, and we wish you the best on your next...out in the free world, I guess.

I have a quick question. We are going from the iconic buildings, everybody understands the Centre Block, the Peace Tower, among other things, to a number of beautiful branches I see.

What are your thoughts on the tourist industry? Have you thought about it in terms of the tourist industry? What sort of experience are they going to have?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: One of the things we've been doing over the past year or two is keeping the local tourist industry up to date on what we're doing. They are informed about the fact that we're going to be doing visits in the two new buildings. They are familiar with what's coming up. The big questions for the tourism industry.... They're selling an experience. They're selling an opportunity to come and visit these buildings.

One of the things we do not have the answer to is the planning assumption that we're moving in September. The actual formal approval of that is not something we have a hand in deciding, and we're waiting. What the tourism industry is looking for is when it starts. When do we shift from Centre Block to the new buildings? Unfortunately we're not in a position to confirm that date.

Mr. Bob Saroya: I'm assuming your staff is going to be quadrupled, from one branch to the four or five, whatever the final number may be. Would that have a huge effect on your budget? Do you have to cut something to balance that, or are you comfortable doing what you need to do?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: It would be fair to say that there will be an increased pressure. If I take, for example, the visitor program, we currently do guided tours in one building. In the future, we'll be doing it in two buildings. Right there, you need people to just do the visit, marshal the people, and be able to respond to demand. We expect that more resources will be required.

Moving from our current situation to more points of service is making us look at our models. How do we do things? Do we need more resources? There's going to be a pressure, for sure. I believe that will be likely after my departure. Once this committee considers, probably in the fall, the estimates or the votes for the Library of Parliament, those questions will be brought to your attention.

I don't know if there's anything you might want to add. At the moment we're looking at what those pressures are. Part of the challenge is, again, related to the date of the move. If we have to be seated in those new buildings in September, well, we better get ready for that. If it's delayed for whatever reason, then that's a different scenario. We're still in the analysis of what the impact will be at that level.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Going back to the boutique, I guess it's everybody's favourite place. Last time you mentioned that the sales had doubled, if my memory is correct, from the previous year, or something along that line. You're doubling the size of the boutique. What sorts of new sales are you expecting? Are they going to double, triple, quadruple ? Are you prepared to make those sales? I come from retail and I know the pressures on it. Are you prepared for this?

● (1325)

Ms. Catherine MacLeod: I believe we're prepared. We hired a crackerjack retail expert—a bit unusual for a library—a couple of years ago. She has made some serious changes in the boutique in terms of modernizing products, really fun new products. It's been going very well. Our sales have been growing exponentially. We're not in it to make money. We're in it to serve parliamentarians and visitors. We keep that in mind. We believe we're well prepared to have a really dynamic boutique in the new space.

Mr. Bob Saroya: The last question is on the visual effects, or whatever you call it, the project for $5 million. Have you seen it, or can we see it before we leave so we can talk about it? I'm just following up for my friend across the aisle.

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: It doesn't exist yet. We're still developing the concept, what goes in it, what points will be highlighted. While we understand Parliament, the creative side, the artistic side of it, that's where the National Film Board comes into play.

I know they started to document and gather information. That's where Carleton University helped with images, and we've done some recording of sounds in the buildings because sound is very much indicative of what goes on in there. But we haven't assembled anything yet. We're not quite there.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Thank you.

Madam Jordan.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

First of all, I'd like to echo my colleague's sentiments about the great work you do. It's phenomenal. I was elected in 2015, and you've been a huge help to me and my staff, so thank you for that.

With regard to when you closed in 2000, how long were you closed for?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: I believe we were closed for four years.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Okay, so this is quite a bit longer.

The other question I have is this. You have five locations that are replacing this location, which, to be quite honest, I'm very sad to see closing. What happens to those five locations when you reopen? Are you going to maintain them? You've said they'll all be used for different things. If you move things back into the main library, what happens to those other locations?

Ms. Catherine MacLeod: We have three locations now. We also have a small branch at Confederation Building, and 125 Sparks, which will become our main focus during the 10 years, is currently also an active branch. We're renovating Confed and 125 Sparks, but you're right, we are opening new branches at West Block and at the Government Conference Centre. We'll have to see how popular they are. It's a great space for senators. It's on the mezzanine and the West Block is a unique and beautiful space as well. We'll see where we are and what the cost is over 10 years to keep operations going.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Thank you.

Senator Duffy.

Hon. Michael Duffy (Senator, Prince Edward Island (Cavendish), ISG): Thank you, Chair, and thanks to our witnesses for being here. I echo the congratulations on all the great work you do.

There's a fear among some senators that because we will be off campus, down the street, in some ways the Senate may be forgotten. I'm wondering if, first, on your video walls and wherever there's a video stream, you will make sure both chambers are up at all times. Secondly, we look around this historic railway committee room, which has been here since 1922, and we see the changes that have taken place in technology. We've now added on wireless routers and cameras, and it's a bit of an ad hoc arrangement. Will we have Wi-Fi across the precincts, so that tourists who come will be able to get virtual tours on their phones or commentary with tour guides on their various hand-held devices as they move from one area to another on Parliament Hill?

Can we assume that when this building is redone, all of that technology will be there, but most of it will be hidden, rather than add-ons, as we see today?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: When it comes to the content of those virtual experiences, for sure the Senate will be included in there. It is part of this Parliament. It is absolutely part of that content. I hope the senators will be reassured about that. Our library always ensures that both chambers are recognized in whatever is done on Parliament.

When it comes to technology, the Library of Parliament does not really have information on the extent of access to Wi-Fi technology, or what it will look like when we come back to this building. I don't think we really have information about that.

● (1330)

Hon. Michael Duffy: Maybe I can make it as a representation that we ensure that. I come from Prince Edward Island. There are campgrounds that are supposedly out in the woods. The campground operators tell me there is a demand now from people who come to camp to have Wi-Fi in the woods. I'm sure your experts will have thought of this, but I don't want us to be left without Wi-Fi.

Thank you.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): Okay, we've reached 1:30 p.m. I'd like to thank the witnesses for coming in, and for the testimony.

Yes, Madam Quach.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: I have a question. What is the status of our requests to have either the Clerk of the House of Commons or a member of the Privy Council appear before the committee to discuss all things digital? We said we would get back to this and that we would probably devote a meeting to this. I'm wondering where we are at with this request?

It was about the digitization of documents. I made this request at the last meeting of the committee, and I was told that this would be done.

I think the clerk of the committee was supposed to send the invitation.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): If that's something the committee wants to discuss, we can discuss it at committee. If the committee would like, we can discuss that after we've released our witnesses.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: I asked for this at the last meeting, and we said that we would do this and that we would discuss it at the next meeting of the committee. However, there is nothing on the agenda. So I don't know when to bring it up.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): I've been told that it was actually just a suggestion last time, but if this is something you'd like to discuss, we could actually discuss it during committee business.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Yes, please.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Gagan Sikand): That is duly noted.

Thank you for being here. I hope everyone enjoys the rest of the day.

The meeting is adjourned.

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